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AUTHOR Kilcrease, Annie M.; Jones, Louise
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that identified Mississippi middle school principals' perceptions of middle school functions and characteristics. Three broad functions of middle schools include: (1) to provide a program especially adapted to diverse student needs; (2) to promote continuity of education; and (3) to introduce needed innovations in curriculum and instruction. Data were gathered from a survey mailed to 90 middle school principals in Mississippi. A total of 63 responses were received, a 70 percent response rate. The survey instrument identified principals' attitudes toward the functions and characteristics with respect to five school components--students, teachers, principals, curriculum, and facilities and organization. Findings indicate that most of the functions and characteristics were being implemented with the exception of those in the facilities/organization category. Principals identified a trend toward a more traditional, content-based, teacher-centered education. It is recommended that the Mississippi State Department of Education develop a comprehensive middle school guide, provide staff-development activities for middle school educators, set standards for the operation of middle schools, and set standards for middle school teacher certification. (Contains 44 references.) (LMI)

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Principals' Perceptions of the Functions and Characteristics of Middle Schools in Mississippi

by
Dr. Annie M. Kilcrease
Principal of A.W. Watson Elementary School
Port Gibson, MS

Dr. Louise Jones
Associate Professor of Education
Jackson State University
Jackson, MS

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Discussion (Research/Evaluation/Program Results)

"Principals' Perceptions of the Functions and Characteristics of Middle Schools in Mississippi"

Abstract

Louise Jackson Jones and Annie M. Kilcrease, Jackson State University

The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of middle school principals toward the functions and characteristics of the middle school concepts in Mississippi's middle schools. Sixty-three middle school principals, constituting a 70% return rate, responded to the survey entitled "Mississippi Middle School Survey." The survey included demographic questions and 57 Likert items. A Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to analyze the data.

The results of the study indicated no significant differences in middle school principals' perceptions of the functions and characteristics of middle schools based upon gender, age, race, degree held, and years of experience. Significant differences were indicated between perceptions and student enrollment ($p < .05$). Research questions were posed and yielded the following results: Most middle school principals had not received training in early adolescent development, the middle school philosophy, and concepts.

The findings of this study indicated there is a need to provide formal staff development training and extensive in-service activities in middle school practices for all middle school personnel. State educational agencies should set statewide standards for disseminating the middle school concepts throughout the states and for establishing and operating middle schools.

Principals' Perceptions of the Functions and Characteristics of Middle Schools in Mississippi

Theoretical Framework

Prior to 1900, the grade configuration for American schools was kindergarten through grade eight, and grades nine through twelve, the 8-4 plan. By the early 1900's the 8-4 plan traditional school system was being reorganized into a new grade structure consisting of kindergarten through grade six, grades seven through nine, and grades ten through twelve, the 6-3-3 plan. The grades seven through nine element constituted the junior high school organization. The first junior high schools with grades 7, 8, and 9 were introduced in Columbus, Ohio, in 1909. The philosophical reason for shifting to the 6-3-3 plan was that adolescents, ages twelve to fourteen, have special needs and are better served in a secondary setting rather than an elementary one (Moss, 1969).

By the 1930's, the junior high school concept was gaining in popularity. Between 1954 and 1964, an increase in junior high schools occurred, with 72 percent of public secondary schools reporting nationwide in 1964 that they were reorganized units consisting of grades seven through nine, junior high schools (Moss, 1969). In the mid 1960's, the junior high school organizational structure began to receive extensive criticism. The basis for the criticism was provided on the philosophical grounds that junior high schools were the wrong kinds of settings to meet the needs of the transescent learner (Nickerson, 1966). According to George (1981), the junior high school became the "Edsel of American education"

(p. 12). The principal indictments regarding the junior high school were summarized by Alexander and George (1981) and Moss (1969), in their assertion that the junior high school failed as the appropriate educational organization for transescent because it had become nothing more than a mini-high school; that it had lost sight of the importance of allowing students to explore and experiment with their various talents and skills in a gradual, developmental manner.

The development of the middle school concept evolved directly from the need for structural change embodied by the junior high school criticism. The envisioned structural change involved not only a reorganization of the physical aspects of middle grade education, but also a recapturing of the original educational goals that had fostered the development of the junior high school in the early 1900's. The philosophical rationale for the middle school was provided by Toepfer (1973a) when he stated, "The current assembly line posture of schools for this middle level (referring to junior high schools) cannot accommodate the human needs that students bring to it" (p. 5). Wiles (1976) and Nickerson (1966) felt that the junior high school had become too content based and academically oriented, while the new middle school concept embodied the developmental needs of the transescent learners. Alexander (1971) saw the middle school organization not as an extension upward of the elementary system nor as a downward of the secondary system but instead as a differentiated educational program focused directly on the period of growth and development between childhood and adolescence.

Beane (1993) stated that overcrowding and desegregation, on the one hand, and research about early adolescence and dissatisfaction with the junior high school on the other, contributed to the emergence of the middle school movement. Early literature about the middle schools suggests that several themes guided the beginnings of the movement: developing understanding about and sensitivity to the characteristics of early adolescents, and the elevation of the middle school to differentiate the junior high school from the high school.

Evidence for the increase of middle schools was presented in a comprehensive study completed by Kealy (1971) which identified the number of middle schools in operation nationwide. Kealy's study showed that nationally, middle schools had more than doubled since their inception. He further revealed that more states were regularly implementing middle schools than ever prior to the study.

As the 21st Century approaches, the middle school movement remains the largest and most comprehensive effort at organizational and curricular changes in the history of American public schooling. The contemporary middle school movement, by 1994, was at least 30 years old, and shows no sign of slowing (George and Shewey, 1994). Thousands of school districts in all fifty states and many other nations, have moved toward the middle schools as alternatives to K-8, 7-9, 7-12, or other pre-existing plans. Market Data Retrieval in 1993 reported that there were 11,215 middle level schools with the following categories (George and Shewey, 1994).

Grade	Number
5 - 8	1,223
6 - 8	6,155
7 - 8	2,412
7 - 9	1,425

Advocates define the middle school as an organization that encompasses three to five grades between the elementary and high school levels which recognize that students "in-between" have characteristics and needs that are unique and different from those of students in the elementary or senior high school (Alexander and George, 1981). The studies of Kealy (1971), Moss (1969), and Kindred, Wolotkiewiz, Mickelson, and Capelin (1981) identified grades six through eight and grades five through eight as the most common grade configuration in middle schools. Moss (1969) and other researchers and middle school practitioners state that the ninth grade should be combined with grades ten through twelve and should be separated entirely from the middle educational system.

A study of literature presents various definitions of middle level school. Alexander and George (1981) define the middle school as an educational response to the needs of youngsters during transescent years, and as such, deals with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs. Toepfer (1988) defines middle school as an educational effort, programs, and grade organizations between elementary and high school. This term is gaining wide use as a single description for all programs that deal with any combination of grades five through eight for

youngsters between ten and fourteen years of age.

The National Middle School Association in This We Believe (1992), defines middle school as an educational program that is based on the needs and characteristics of a most diverse and varied population. Wiles and Bondi (1991) define the middle school as an educational response to characteristics of youngsters during early adolescence and as such, deals with their full range of intellectual and developmental needs. In 1971, the Mississippi State Board of Education adopted a legal definition of middle school as any facility or institution that includes grades six through eight; or any combination thereof is identified as a middle school and includes the term 'middle' in its name.

The middle school organization of grades six through eight is most likely to provide the key functions and characteristics commonly advocated as most appropriate to the needs of students aged ten to fourteen, according to a recent Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development survey of 672 schools nationwide serving students of this age. For the purpose of this study, functions will be defined in terms of the purpose to be served by the middle school.

Middle level educational literature describes the extent to which the key functions are implemented in middle schools. Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, and Kealy (1968) cited three broad functions which attempt to justify the existence of middle schools:

1. To provide a program especially adapted to the wide range of individual differences and special needs of the in-between ages.

2. To create a school ladder arrangement that promotes continuity of education from school entrance to school exit.

3. To facilitate through a new organization the introduction of the needed innovations in curriculum and instruction.

The emerging middle school movement throughout the United States is, in part, an effort to rediscover, redefine, revamp, and reintroduce the basic pedagogical principles of adolescent learning upon which the junior high school was originally developed during its inception (Kohut, 1980). Thus, the failure of the junior high school created the emergence of the middle school movement. Possibly, a majority of the middle schools in Mississippi exist in name only, thus patterning their instructional practices and educational programs more after the junior high school than after the middle school model.

Purpose of Study

As of 1994, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive data to substantiate the degree to which the functions and characteristics of middle schools are practiced in Mississippi as recommended in current literature. Therefore, this study focused on the assessment of middle school principals' perception of the degree of implementation of the functions and characteristics of the middle schools in Mississippi as compared to the ideal functions and characteristics of the middle schools found in professional literature as measured by the Mississippi Middle School Survey. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. Are the concepts of middle schools implemented in Mississippi middle schools?
2. Should all middle school principals be required to take middle school principals be required to take middle school courses?
3. Should all faculty and staff employed in middle schools be provided staff development and continuous in-service on middle school philosophy, functions, and characteristics?
4. Have principals of middle schools in Mississippi received training in the middle school philosophy and concepts?
5. Have the faculty and staff received training in early adolescent development, the middle school philosophy and concepts?
6. Is team teaching/interdisciplinary curriculum practiced in middle schools in Mississippi?

Methodology

The population of this study consisted of all middle school principals in Mississippi. The list of principals was comprised of the 90 principals of the schools containing the word "middle" in the school name and was found in the 1993-94 Directory of Mississippi Schools published by the Mississippi State Department of Education. The principal of each middle school was selected as the person to respond to the questionnaire.

Instrumentation

In order to determine whether the recommended functions and characteristics of the middle school were being implemented in the middle schools of Mississippi, it was necessary to review the literature to identify the recommended practices related to the functions and characteristics of the middle school. A list of the findings was compiled. The survey instrument, consisting of 57 Likert items developed by Allen, Splitgerber and Ryan (1980), contained a listing of various functions and characteristics. In a review of current literature, the researcher found that the items included on the instrument met the needs of this research and were all relevant to current practices in today's middle schools. Permission was granted by Dr. Harvey A. Allen to utilize the instrument and to make whatever changes necessary to collect the data needed for this study. The researcher changed one word in each subcategory based upon the suggestion of the doctoral committee. This allowed the principal to respond to each item as it related to actual practices in his/her school.

Part I consisted of 57 statements on the "Mississippi Middle School Survey." Part II consisted of seven questions developed to determine the current factual trends in the respective schools. Part III was designed to collect demographic data on each respondent.

The initial instrument contained 57 functions and characteristics items. It was presented to members of the researcher's doctoral committee and a school district's researcher for evaluation. Recommendations received were incorporated

into the survey.

Seven research questions were developed to ascertain middle school principals' perceptions of the implementation of current trends in their schools. The Mississippi Middle School Survey was validated on administrators in the Claiborne County Public School District. Internal consistency reliabilities were calculated using the Cronbach Alpha Index of Reliability. The dimensionality of the five subcategories was examined by means of principal component factor analysis with a varimax rotation. The internal consistency reliability for the five subcategories was (1) students (.93), (2) teachers (.93), (3) principals (.93), (4) curriculum (.96), and (5) facilities and organization (.86). The factor analysis revealed strong within scale item homogeneity.

The instrument was used to determine the attitude of Mississippi middle school principals toward the functions and characteristics of the middle school with respect to five school components: (1) students (10 items); (2) teachers (13 items); (3) principals (12 items); (4) curriculum (12 items) and (5) facilities and organization (10 items). The principals were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed (SA), agreed (A), disagreed (D), or strongly disagree (SD) with functions and characteristics listed in the survey. The responses were coded as follow: SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, and SD = 1. A high score indicated a strong endorsement of a statement while a low score represented a weak endorsement. The middle school principals were instructed to respond according to their actual middle school operations and practices rather than the ideal practices.

Findings

Findings which were obtained through the statistical analysis of the data included the following:

1. All of the identified functions and characteristics related to the student subcategory are being implemented to a high degree in the Mississippi middle schools.

2. Eleven of the 13 functions and characteristics related to the teacher subcategory are being implemented in the Mississippi middle schools.

3. Ten of the 12 functions and characteristics related to the principal subcategory are being implemented in the Mississippi middle schools.

4. Eleven of the 12 functions and characteristics related to the curriculum subcategory are being implemented in the middle schools in Mississippi.

5. Only 4 of the 10 functions and characteristics related to facilities and organization are being implemented in the middle schools in Mississippi.

Conclusions

This study provides a description of the principals' perceptions of the degree of implementation of the recommended functions and characteristics of the middle school. Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions about middle schools in Mississippi have been derived:

1. The middle school curriculum heavily emphasizes reading, writing, and arithmetic as basic to the individual development of the students, provides the discipline necessary for students to learn, and focuses on students learning to

learn.

2. The middle school teacher establishes a climate of classroom discipline and teacher-directed learning. The teacher supports guidance and counseling services and is accountable for students' academic achievement.

3. The middle school principal perceives himself/herself as the instructional leader of the school and involves staff members in the decision making process of the school.

4. The curriculum of the middle school continues the development and refinement of basic skills begun during elementary school, focuses on the core skills as the basis for curriculum designing, and focuses on school programs to meet the needs of students.

5. The organizational patterns most widely implemented in the middle schools in Mississippi are departmentalization at grades five and six, along with various groupings.

6. The responses given by middle school principals indicate a trend toward a more traditional, content-based, teacher-centered education. Indications are that the middle school has become more subject-centered than student-centered, more teacher-centered than student-choice, which conflict with the basic tenets of middle school education. The curriculum is basically traditional, with little or no provision for flexible scheduling. Additionally, the curriculum does not broaden the program to include shops, labs, or special enrichment classrooms. Less than 70% of the principals stated that neither team teaching nor

interdisciplinary instruction is being utilized.

7. The means and standard deviation scores of the facilities and organization subcategory indicated a high degree of disagreement over the other four subcategories: student, teacher, principal, and curriculum.

8. There are a number of recommended functions and characteristics of the middle school not being implemented to a high degree in the middle schools in Mississippi.

Recommendations

As a result of these findings, some of the recommendations offered include the need for the development and distribution of a comprehensive middle school guide by the Mississippi State Department of Education. This study could serve as a starting point in such an effort. Staff development and in-service training in middle school practices should be provided, particularly on such topics as team-teaching, designing humanistic curriculum and student-directed learning. The State Department of Education should set standards for establishing and operating middle schools. Widespread efforts to retrain middle school personnel should be undertaken by state educators. The Mississippi State Department of Education should require that middle school personnel hold middle school certificates in order to teach in the middle schools. However, according to Volume I, Winter 1995 publication by the Mississippi Middle School Association, Mississippi has recently approved a new middle level certification.

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